Washington and Lincoln

NEVER SINCE ANY OF US was born did the study of history have an appeal so strong as today. It is impossible to write history, since the summer of 1914, or to read it, without feeling especially that we are groping after the laws of a fate that may be a power that "makes for righteousness"; or may not.

The relation of biography to history will forever be seen differently by different minds. An artist in portraiture will star the protagonists. One who feels himself an adept in generalizing about masses will stress environment, trend, and mob psychology. It happens that in the series of Chronicles of America, being put out by the Yale Press, the two volumes dealing with our two greatest Americans approach history with different emphasis. Professor Henry James Ford, in Washington and His Colleagues, is downright and definite, and somewhat distrustful, I take it, of a Freudian interpretation of history. Professor Nathaniel W. Stephenson, in Abraham Lincoln and the Union, is rather severe with the obvious and would teach us that things are not what they seem. The former naturally emphasizes individual leadership more than the latter. Fortunately the eras chosen fit the contrasting points of view. Whatever Tolstoi did to Napoleon in War and Peace, even that Russian genius would have found it rather difficult to tell the story of Washington's time without giving distinctly creative roles to Washington and to Hamilton. It is much more possible to discuss the Civil War period in terms of groups and undercurrents and psychological niceties. Mr. Stephenson says:

> The old days when the American Civil War was conceived as a clear-cut issue are as a watch in the night that has passed, and we now realize that historical movements are almost without exception the resultants of many motives. We have come to recognize that men have always misapprehended themselves, contradicted themselves, obeyed primal impulses, and then deluded themselves with sophistications upon the springs of action. . . . We are prone to forget that we act from subconscious quite as often as from conscious influences, from motives that arise out of the dim parts of our being, from the midst of shadows that psychology has only recently begun to lift, where senses subtler than the obvious make use of fear, intuition, prejudice, habit, and illusion, and too often play with us as the wind with blown leaves.

Professor Ford's manner is indicated by this:

> The prevailing tone of public life was one of dull and narrow provincialism, at times thickening into stupidity, at times sharpening into spite, although ordinarily made respectable by a serious attitude to life and by a solid fortitude in facing whatever the distracted times might present. It was the influence of a few great men that made America a nation. . . . A mistake might have been fatal to the existence of the government. It has become so powerful and massive since that time that we can hardly realize what a rickety structure it then was, and how readily, in less capable hands, it might have collapsed.

Mr. Stephenson's descriptions of the American people are ambitious. They include all time and even points of exclamation. "Americans have always been the slaves of phrases!" See Mephistopheles on the power of words, in Faust, where Americans are not specified. "Democracies are mercurial!" See recent newspapers on changes in Russia and Germany. "Greeley was a type of American that no European can understand: he believed in talk, and more talk, and still more talk, as the cure for earthly ills." No European? Shades of the Gauls and Slavs!

However, regardless of whether the historian's mouthful is masticable or not, there is something wholesome in a protest against conventionalized history. The actual "no; no; not a sixpence" is to a ripe taste more interesting than the Fourth of July forms about millions for defense and not one cent for tribute. The Washington of Weems died hard, but when it died it left a nobler figure. Lincoln himself is on record with a disdainful remark about biographies whose heroes are interchangeably perfect. And populations are no more immune than heroes. Vox populi vox dei needs a good deal of explaining to make it satisfactory, as the strongest leaders have realized. When the Jay treaty was being negotiated George Washington was called an incapable general, an embezzling President, and the stepfather of his country, with enough persistence to make him say he would rather be in his grave than in the presidency. The general disruptive spirit is indicated by the fact that as late as when Washington was inaugurated Rhode Island and North Carolina were still outside the union. The new constitution was, in the Virginia Convention of 1788, called a scheme of the military men to subject the people to their rule. Leading the people forward is never a sinecure. Lincoln endured more injustice than Washington, although he did not face as heavy difficulties. The people's opinion of Lincoln in 1862 was indicated by the loss of 33 seats in Congress. Lincoln acted against the bitterest national wishes in the Trent affair, as Washington did in the Jay treaty. Perhaps if there is anybody now living who thinks the public is always admirable the most disagreeable reading for

him would be the private correspondence of George Washington. The two greatest Americans interpreted the people profoundly but both of them found frequent occasions to defy the mood of the moment. They both had that bigness of soul that makes such defiance easy, because it makes the accidents of personal success of small importance. Both lived in lonely isolation, Lincoln expressing his loneliness like a poet, Washington remaining inexpressive like an impassive mountain.

No longer is Washington first in the hearts of his countrymen. Lincoln, secure in that place, belongs there, because men live little in their judgments, much in their sentiments. Lincoln was a very great man; Washington was an even greater; but Lincoln lived and expressed the sorrows, the longings, the humor of us all, and the abilities and character of Washington are not easy of approach. There is a Father Abraham, but no Father George. The author of the Gettysburg address, the Second Inaugural, the letter to the woman who had lost five sons, was an inspired artist. The antagonist of Douglas was a matchless debater. The man around whose gigantic figure the American nation was formed is not romantic and he is not to a high degree articulate, there is in the actual Washington little to reach the sentimental soul. Professor Ford says of him: "He had a well-balanced nature which was never disturbed by timidity of any kind and rarely by anxiety. His anger was strong when it was excited, but his ordinary disposition was one of massive equanimity." It was a nature fit for bearing the greatest load ever carried by an American, but it was not a nature to become the aspiration and the consolation of average men.

Of course Lincoln's felicity in expression would not have carried him to the heights, had he not performed great acts. It was with splendid self-control that he put into the Cabinet a man who had bitterly insulted him in his humble days, and it is that magnanimous control that gives the charm to what Lincoln said on a later occasion. "Did Stanton tell you I was a fool? Then I expect I must be one, for he is almost always right." Sometimes the patience is humorous, sometimes infinitely grave. Listen to the tone of this plea for emancipation by purchase: "I do not argue. I beseech you to make arguments for yourselves. You cannot, if you would, be blind to the signs of the times. I beg of you a calm and enlarged consideration of them, ranging, if it may be, far above personal and partisan politics. This proposal makes common cause for a common object, casting no reproaches upon any. It acts not the Pharisee. The change it contemplates would come gently as the dews of heaven, not rending or wrecking anything. Will you not embrace it?" Never was the style more a reflection of the man. He was what Hamlet saw:

> As one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing;
> A man that fortune's buffets and rewards
> Hath taken with equal thanks. . . .

Few great leaders have been so free from pride, that attribute which, "howe'er disguised in its own majesty, is littleness." He never went further in self-appreciation than to say that the Convention had decided that he was "not so poor a horse that they might not make a botch of it in trying to swap." This intellectual and moral purity, this absence of all pettiness, is the lure that never fails in Lincoln. But his charm is one thing, his historical record another. What made him the leader of the nation, and solidified his leadership, was his brains. It was the house-divided-against-itself position, and the defense of it; the Cooper Union speech, including its condemnation of John Brown; the reply to Greeley on emancipation; the combination of vision with judgment. Not only has his personality won the world. It is also true that his judgment has so impressed us that we daily guess at what his views would be. As to his standards, I will merely quote these words: "The resources, advantages, and power of the American people are very great, and they have consequently succeeded to very great responsibilities."

Possibly some poet-historian will some time draw a portrait that will make us feel Washington as definitely as we feel Lincoln; but I doubt if it can be done. There is not the intimacy. There is only size, strength, security. From his boyhood almost to his death he was put in positions of responsibility and he never failed. Before he was made Commander-in-Chief he had already established his reputation as the man of weightiest judgment among men remarkable for their gifts. During the war the feeble colonies, whether in the army, the legislature, or civil life, drew their strength from him. In founding the new nation, in launching it, in meeting the perils of its first years Washington was the one to dominate, to unify, to give direction. For him the most brilliant minds of all kinds worked. Men like Jefferson and Madison followed him, along with those like Hamilton and Jay. No American has ever collected nearly as much ability around him as Washington, or guided it with such Olympian strength. Even looking at world-history we can almost say literally, with Byron, "there was but one."

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